Peoplehood contested: Dalits and the Struggle for Citizenship in Postcolonial India (1946-1950)

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"No political peoples are natural or primordial. All are the products of long, conflict-ridden histories, and all must be understood as human creations." [1]

It is essential to acknowledge that in postcolonial states, phenomena like political communities and peoplehood were shaped by newly formed nations. Therefore peoplehood is not predetermined but historically constructed and continually contested. As non-Western democracies emerged in the mid-twentieth century, political elites, citizens and marginalised groups negotiated who belonged to the nation. These actors decided the criteria of membership: who was included, excluded or partially recognised. This process was especially visible during democratic transitions when minorities asserted their rights and challenged deeply-rooted hierarchies, reshaping the image of peoplehood. Yet, anti-colonial elites framed ideas of political membership and structured institutions to maintain power, while Dalits exercised agency to contest and redefine them.

Due to these actors, peoplehood appeared as a shared identity shaped by cultural narratives and ethics about collective belonging. Political communities formalised peoplehood into institutions that established authority within a state. Citizenship, in turn, required legal recognition, rights and political participation. These unifying mechanisms were contested by excluded groups, especially Dalits, whose struggles changed everyday conditions. Understanding the Indian identity as a temporal process that unfolds over years, especially in newly formed states, shows how colonial legacies shaped politics and cultural hierarchies. As I will examine in this case study of India's Dominion era, during which the extension of suffrage and formal recognition of marginalised groups did not guarantee equality within the caste system. The meaning of belonging thus evolves alongside political, cultural and social transformations. Exploring these interactions allows scholars to trace legal and cultural forms of citizenship, which transformed India's peoplehood after independence.

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1 Rogers M. Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 32.

In the 1980s, scholarly interest in nationalism, decolonisation and identity was influenced by Anderson's *Imagined Communities*.[2] Anderson highlights how nationalism emerged through shared narratives, symbols and media which allowed individuals to imagine themselves as part of a larger collective without physical interaction. Literature and vernacular languages replaced dynastic and religious authority with secular loyalties that caused different territorial, cultural communities. His example of the Stuart dynasty during the 17th century when sovereignty was in the monarchs power and populations were subjects rather than citizens. However, after the execution of Charles I in 1649, sacral monarchy declined and new forms of political authority emerged, where sovereignty was claimed in the name of 'the people' rather than divine right, eventually resulting in an imagined national belonging.[3] This analogy shows that India's transition from colonial subjects to citizens after 1947 redefined sovereignty, especially by unifying the princely states. So basically, members of a political community did perceive themselves as part of a morally connected culture, willing to defend its values.[4]

Moreover, Rogers Smith's *Stories of Peoplehood*,[5] reflecting the early 2000s turn toward transnational identities, develops a general theory emphasising that membership is not merely culturally constructed but also politically and morally justified. Central to this theory is the idea of 'ethically constitutive stories,' in which members share an ethical essence tied with religion, race, or culture that defines the moral boundaries of a political community. Identity is therefore situated in both culture, as Anderson suggests, and in political processes that tied ideas of right and wrong to the way a community was formed.[6] Smith's example of the United States as a wide and strong political community, where citizens are expected to recognise its authority in all aspects of life. However, such communities may also undermine diversity by pressuring everyone to conform, overlooking minorities and potentially creating conflict or coercion.[7] Had India a strong and wide community?

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2 Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2016).
3 Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, 14-22.
4 Anderson, 37-46.
5 Rogers M. Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Memberships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
6 Rogers M. Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Memberships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 10-16.
7 Smith, 19-27.

Besides, in the mid 2000s, international political studies increasingly focused on identity, sovereignty and minority rights in a globalised, transnational world. In Croucher's article "The Politics and Perils of Peoplehood,"[8] contributes to this debate by arguing that the act of creating peoplehood always carries the danger of exclusion and coercion. In today's world of migration and global connectivity, political communities operate beyond the nation-state's boundaries. She stresses that states are no longer the main source of belonging. Increasingly, transnational institutions, such as the United Nations, complicate and sometimes undermine traditional, nation-based definitions of community.

Specifically, Nazmul Sultan's *Waiting for the People*[9] draws on recent global history and anticolonial thought to show how peoplehood was envisioned ethically and politically before independence. By looking beyond postcolonial nationalism and examining underexplored networks, he demonstrates that Indian liberal elites both criticised imperial exploitation and relied on British authority to achieve self-determination and self-government. This reveals that the Indian culture was entangled with hierarchical colonial structures. Because educated elites were key in developing political awareness among the masses. Leaders like Naoroji combined ethical leadership with appeal to British authority to create a class of educated intermediaries who could mediate between imperial power and emerging groups, including Dalits. So the peoplehood of the lowest caste, especially the history from below, is neglected; Dalits are understudied compared to other peoples.[10]

Extending Sultan's argument on elite constructions of peoplehood. In "Historic Legacy of Untouchability and Caste Enslavement,"[11] Dalits' history reveals that political visions were already grounded in exclusionary legal codes such as the *Manusmriti* which prescribes that Dalits must serve higher castes. Dalits endured centuries of enslavement and were denied property and education, while independence suggests that citizenship alone could not guarantee a democracy. Ambedkar's interventions in the Constituent Assembly,

8 Sheila Croucher, "The Politics and Perils of Peoplehood," *International Studies Review* 8, no. 1 (2006): 77–89.
9 Nazmul Sultan, *Waiting for the People: The Idea of Democracy in Indian Anticolonial Thought* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2024).
10 Sultan, 67-81.
11 Amit Thorat and Mohammad Aquil, "Historic Legacy of Untouchability and Caste Enslavement: A Case of Reparative Justice," *Journal of Social Inclusion Studies* 7, no. 2 (December 2021): 107–16.

demanding legal protections and anti-untouchability measures shows the gap between elite narratives of a unified Indian nation and the lived realities of caste oppression. This tension between peoplehood and citizenship lies at the heart of India's democracy.[12]

This raises the central question: *How did anti-colonial thinkers' political narratives in the Constituent Assembly during India's Dominion era (1946-1950) shaped Dalits' recognition and inclusion within the emerging political definitions of Indian peoplehood?* To answer this, the essay adopts a thematic approach structured into three sub-questions answered in three chapters of around 1200 words, followed by a conclusion of around 500 words.

The first section analyses from a political approach: *How did legal frameworks, such as the Indian Independence Act of 1947, defined Dalits' citizenship and determined their inclusion or exclusion?* It examines laws, elections and reservation policies in relation to caste. Primary sources to include government acts, such as the People's act of 1950, Constituent Assembly debates and constitutional articles. Supported by the monographs of Smith and De and legal-historical studies on Indian democracy.

Chapter two explores how the Constituent Assembly translated political narratives into institutional measures. Focusing on leaders' rhetoric such as Nehru, nationalist pamphlets and newspapers that promoted an imagined Indian peoplehood. Also to investigate how it was communicated and shaped Dalit inclusion. Addressing a cultural-narrated lens, this chapter asks: *How did Constituent Assembly narratives shape Indian peoplehood and Dalit inclusion?* Supported by conceptual frameworks from Anderson and Sultan to link cultural narratives to political processes.

The third section focuses on Dalit agency, addressing: *How did Dalits contested the boundaries of political membership and assert their claims to citizenship in the early years of Indian democracy?* Exploring on petitions, protests, local politics and records from Dalit organizations. To analyse this, I should apply Sultan's emphasis on networks and elite-mass interactions and Croucher's argument risk of coercion. Combining legal, cultural and social perspectives allows the study to examine how membership was negotiated. Therefore laws, reforms, speeches and press are supporting my approach of history from above as well as below.

12 Amit Thorat and Mohammad Aquil, 107–16.

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